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*The Life and Letters of George Bancroft.* In two volumes. By M. A. DEWOLFE HOWE. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1908. Pp. xi, 294; 364.)

THE basis of Mr. Howe's work has been a collection of Bancroft's papers placed in his hands by the late Mrs. John C. Bancroft, daughter-in-law of the historian. While the papers were voluminous, they had been already somewhat classified, and contained not only many originals of early letters, but also copies of those of later date. In addition, Mr. Howe has made use of such manuscript collections as the Jackson, Van Buren and Polk papers in the Library of Congress, and has had the invaluable assistance of numerous friends and correspondents of Bancroft. Here and there a letter which had already seen the light is reproduced, but far the greater portion of the contents of these volumes is now for the first time printed. The volumes represent, however, only a selection from the great mass of Bancroft papers, and make no claim to completeness in any direction. On the other hand, Mr. Howe systematically gives to the letters the foremost place, and his narrative, though dealing informally with the general course of Bancroft's life as well as with its critical moments, is as a rule elaborated only to the point of skilfully piecing the letters together. It may be said at once that Mr. Howe has done his work judiciously, and that the picture of the great historian which he presents is at least clear in outline and interesting in detail.

Fortunately for the biographer, Bancroft was not only a voluminous correspondent, but a matter of fact one as well. He wrote in the greatest detail of what he did from day to day, of his friendships, his journeys and his work; and his letters, almost always lively and forcible in style, are a readable chronicle of his multifarious activities. What strikes one most often, perhaps, in these volumes is the remarkable range and character of his acquaintance. From the time when as a youth of eighteen he began his studies at Göttingen to the closing days at New York, Newport and Washington, he was fortunate in his friends. Extraordinary indeed is the galaxy of scholars, statesmen and scientists whose names stud the pages of his letters, and among whom he moved on terms of admitted equality and not seldom of intimacy. To few Americans of the nineteenth century did the intellectual leaders of Europe pay such spontaneous and ready homage.

Mr. Howe well observes that the periods of a man's life are not marked off one from another with the definiteness of chapters in a book, and warns his readers that the topical grouping of his material does not imply sudden transitions or absence of gradual growth in Bancroft's career. In the case of Bancroft, however, the natural divisions are exceptionally well marked. Beginning as a brilliant student at home and abroad, he passed a few years of unsuccessful schoolmastering and preaching before finding his sphere in politics and history. Mr. Howe

points out, perhaps with over-emphasis, the social disadvantage which the entertainer of Democratic opinions was under in the New England of the thirties, though suggesting that Bancroft may have been one of those who foresaw the coming change of the Jacksonian régime and shrewdly took his position early. Still, when one considers his intimate relations with Van Buren and Polk and his selection for the navy portfolio, not to speak of his later distinguished service as minister to Great Britain and Germany, it must be admitted that social discrimination had its compensations. The fact was, however, as his letters abundantly show, that Bancroft, notwithstanding his ten-volume assertion of American democracy, was himself cosmopolitan, and could somewhat do without New England in the larger social life in which he moved.

As a private citizen, on the other hand, Bancroft's attitude towards politics had in it much of aloofness. He expressed himself with frankness on political subjects in his letters; he gauged with singular accuracy the nature of the struggle between the North and the South in 1861-1865, and saw more clearly than many active leaders the dangers of Republican reconstruction; but he was not much consulted by public men on questions of the day, nor did he often affect the course of events. The claim that he was chiefly instrumental in securing the nomination of Polk, already made in a letter of Bancroft's published in this REVIEW in July, 1906, is further enforced by the letter of July 6, 1844, to Polk (I. 251-255), in which the episode is circumstantially described. This, and his essential authorship of Johnson's first message, constitute his chief unofficial contributions to politics.

The many who doubtless will turn to these volumes for details regarding Bancroft's method and work as a historian are doomed in the main to disappointment. Beyond brief mention of the inception of the *History* and of the appearance of the successive volumes and revisions, Mr. Howe's pages give little information not accessible in Bancroft's own prefaces. The letters contain occasional allusions to the visitation of archives, the search for documents, and journeys undertaken to settle some geographical point; but these allusions are not many. The defects of Bancroft's historical method have long since been pointed out, and Mr. Howe wisely refrains from anything more than a brief and judicial restatement of the case, free alike from harsh censure or unfrank apology. As for the letters, they throw no valuable light on the historian's frame of mind. It was worth while, however, to call attention to the zeal and painstaking with which Bancroft pursued his ideal of accuracy, his generous appreciation, albeit with some disheartening exceptions, of those who pointed out his errors, and his readiness to sacrifice in later editions many a florid passage that had had its day. That Bancroft was, on the whole, more highly regarded outside of historical circles than within them, these volumes seem to show; for, of the notable names which fill their pages, those of historians, save Ranke, are relatively few.

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